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Moses J. Gries:  
An Evaluation Based on His Sermons



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Moses J Gries was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1868 and died one year after retiring in 1918. He graduated from Hebrew Union College in 1889 and served Chattanooga as his first pulpit. In 1892, he became the rabbi of Tifereth Israel Congregation in Cleveland, Ohio. He was a charter member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) and served as assistant secretary, treasurer, vice-president and eventually president of the Conference from 1913-1915.

On paper Moses J. Gries was an impressive success. During his tenure membership grew 500% and at one point his Sunday School was the largest in the world. Tifereth Israel Congregation (the Temple) became one of the prominent congregations under his leadership. Even though the synagogue prospered under Gries, he was a man who measured himself by the success of his principles.

Moses J. Gries set four goals for himself as a rabbi: to lead Jews to Judaism, bring Judaism into the lives of Jews, cause the world to understand Judaism, and establish Jewish principles as the moral law of mankind.<sup>1</sup> He was concerned with social justice and the moral elevation of mankind. This man of prestige and member of the upper crust of society walked through the worst neighborhoods of Cleveland to witness the filth and poverty for himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Tenth Anniversary Sermon," November 23, 1902. Moses J. Gries Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati. All subsequent footnotes have the same bibliographic reference.

<sup>2</sup> "The Ideal City," February 25, 1913.

Gries's conception of Judaism was based on the Pittsburgh Platform. The superiority of Judaism according to classical Reform was the moral values that Judaism expresses. The Pittsburgh Platform states: "Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea..." The highest conception of God is morality and ethics; however, the Pittsburgh Platform also recognized that the Bible reflects "primitive ideas" and ritual laws "fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation."<sup>3</sup> Taken to the extreme, one should remove the Torah from the temple; it is a primitive device.

As a Classical Reform Jew and a "radical," Gries molded the temple into a model of his beliefs. Sabbath services were moved to Sunday and the Torah portion was not read from the scroll. At one point, Gries had the scroll removed from the building lest congregants suffer bibliolatry.

Very early in his career Gries delivered a sermon in which he defined what he meant by the term "radical." The title of the sermon was "The Justification of the Radical" (December 17, 1893) and the thesis was "truth must rest on reason." A radical believes that in order for religion to be reasonable, it has to free of mysteries (read Mosaic Revelation). Religion was created by man for man, its development compels change. Although a radical rejects Orthodox Judaism because it is "dead, lifeless, spiritless, socialless, peculiar, distinct, Oriental, and

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<sup>3</sup>The Pittsburgh Platform, the fourth plank.

ancient," he respects the genuine believer. Nonetheless, Orthodox Judaism offers only shackles and religious death. By contrast, Radicalism offers emancipation, that is to say religious freedom and life.

On November 29, 1902, Moses Gries delivered a sermon entitled "The Future of the Temple" where he justified many of his reforms. Jews can celebrate the sabbath on Sunday because there is "no divorce of sacred and secular." It is better that a man be able to attend on Sunday, then not be able to attend because of his employment. He also defended the predominant use of English in the service because it is the language that everyone, Jew and Gentile, understands. Gibberish does not satisfy the spirit or uplift it.

As Moses Gries strove to bring Jews to Judaism, many Jews deliberately avoided the religious enterprise. In his sermon "Modern Jewish Problems" delivered on February 22, 1914, he lamented that assimilation was prevalent in American society.<sup>4</sup> He realized that his fellow Jews were ignorant of their history. The next week he chastised his congregation that "Jews must be Jews religiously."<sup>5</sup> At end of his career, he lashed out in anger at those who were not loyal to Judaism and deliberately came to services once a year to mock.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>See also "The Problem of Judaism in America," April 29, 1917.

<sup>5</sup>"The Message of Judaism to the Modern World," October 26, 1902; "shall We Remain Jews?," November 2, 1902.

<sup>6</sup>"The Problem of Judaism in America," April 29, 1917.

In contrast to assimilation, he believed strongly in the Melting Pot Theory and referred with reverence to a Jewish proponent of this theory, Israel Zangwill.<sup>7</sup> The Melting Pot Theory was a model of how the various cultures and races of immigrants would meld into one, great American society.

From the radical Jewish point of view, the "Melting Pot" meant that everyone would become Jewish. This idea of "Triumphalism" circulated through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the present century. Moses Gries was a proponent of Jewish triumphalism and his sermons contain many statements to demonstrate: unlike other religions, "Judaism has an element of universal religion;"<sup>8</sup> "in their highest form Christianity and Mohammedanism [sic] are Judaism."<sup>9</sup> At the conclusion of the same sermon, Gries argued that the world was becoming Jewish: in religion, God conception, man conception, and thought concerning life and duty.

The universalism of the message of Judaism was an intrinsic belief to Moses Gries. The Jew teaches the world love and justice.<sup>10</sup> The spirit of the Jew from which this teaching derives is the cause of Jewish survival.<sup>11</sup> Judaism unites mankind and affirms positive faith, which means an ethical

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<sup>7</sup>Untitled sermon on erev Pesach, April 8, 1917; "The Ideal City," February 25, 1913.

<sup>8</sup>"As Others See Us," November, 12, 1983.

<sup>9</sup>"Shall We Remain Jews," November 2, 1902.

<sup>10</sup>"The Message of the Jew," Sukkot, October 19, 1902.

<sup>11</sup>ibid.

life.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as Gries concluded a month before he retired, Judaism promotes the universal God, the unity of God, life and history.<sup>13</sup>

His God concept is purely Jewish, but Gries's statements were often in response to pressures from the Christian communities. The Sunday service was open to all, Jew and non-Jew, rich or poor and it appears that many Gentiles did attend. However, throughout his sermons, there were references which only make sense as a response to Christian polemics. In his sermon on October 19, 1902, Gries used Sukkot to explain "The Message of the Jew." The thesis was that by power of the spirit Israel has survived in its own right, not as a witness to Christianity. He was responding to an old but still prevalent accusation that the Jews exist to testify by their lives how miserable life without Jesus is. Gries concluded with his own polemic that "The way to God is more than one--there is no one road to salvation." No Christian religion holds the one true belief in God.

Much later, in 1915, Gries was compelled to respond to a Anti-Jewish article published by a local minister, Dr. Bradley. The response was not that interesting; Gries uses Dr. Bradley's sources against him. The interesting point was that Gries actually had to write and publish this piece in response to a man

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<sup>12</sup> "The Message of Judaism to the Modern World," October 26, 1902.

<sup>13</sup> "What Does the World Think of Judaism," April 1, 1917.

whom he considered a friend.<sup>14</sup>

In his last two months as the rabbi of "The Temple," Gries delivered at least five sermons which summed up his beliefs and experiences. Several of these sermons have already been noted. In his sermon entitled "What Does the World Think of Judaism" (April 1, 1917), Gries delivered a final polemic against Christian charges. Jesus, he stated, was a loyal Jew. He argued for a universal God and concludes "man is divine in his origin and in his destiny." Divinity is not something external to the human being, such as a divine intermediary, which must be called upon to intercede between the human and the deity.

Other pressures were also present in the sermons. The grievous aberration of "Darwinism" that the Jews were a race was a constant battle for Gries. He believed, as the writers of the Pittsburgh Platform believed, that Judaism is only a religion as opposed to a nation. Within the Jewish community he may have argued the difference between religion and nation, but his writings show no evidence. However, when speaking to the larger Cleveland community, he juxtaposed race and religion.<sup>15</sup>

A large part of Gries's rabbinate was concerned with social justice. Women, poverty, prejudice, and charity were repetitive themes in his sermons. His personal commitment is reflected in the organizations in the community he joined and in his writings.

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<sup>14</sup> "Christianity's Debt to Judaism, A reply to Dr. Bradley," February 28, 1915.

<sup>15</sup> "As We See Ourselves," November 10, 1893; "Shall We Remain Jews," November 2, 1902; "New Years Evening," October 1, 1913.



Women played an increasingly important role in the life of the Reformed temple of Cleveland. Gries was the first rabbi to have a woman on the Board of Trustees. He founded the Cleveland Council of Jewish Women and addressed the National Convention of Women when they met in Cleveland on March 3, 1900. He began his remarks to the delegates of the National Convention by comparing the women to men's conventions and how efficient and businesslike they have run the convention. The address dwelt upon the failure of past generations to recognize women, their strengths and their roles. He also mentioned the question of women rabbis but passed no judgment.

In 1902, Gries did a two part sermon on men and women. Man's purpose according to Gries, is to better human life by dispelling error and fighting injustice. The goal of man is to advance civilization towards perfection. The emphasis is moral perfection.

To the modern reader, Gries' ideals for women are dated and chauvinistic. However, in his era, the suggestions are radical. Not once does he mention the typical role of Sunday School teacher, the highest level of leadership for many Jewish women in this era. Instead he believed that the temple should create roles for women within Judaism to increase their importance. He wanted the private social club, an important activity for genteel society, placed in the temple. Women have the ability to gain the same moral perfection as their male counterparts; neither sex should be morally superior.

Moses Gries was also distressed by the poverty of urban areas. At least twice he quoted the death rate of urban populations as being excessively high and avoidable. The horrible conditions in which many residents of Cleveland lived angered him. His address, "The Ideal City," (February 25, 1913) was delivered twice, once from the pulpit and once at a city council meeting held in the public library. He demanded, because he felt it was possible in Cleveland, to have a city free from disease with pure air and potable water in every neighborhood.

In the same address Gries made an argument that there is a strong link between physical health and moral health. If the ideal city is peaceful and secure, then every resident must have the minimal requirements to satisfy their needs. He saw not only poverty, but the lack of education in the poor neighborhoods. In order to be "one big American city," everyone needed the same opportunities.

Prejudice against Jews was readily apparent during Gries's tenure in Cleveland according to his sermons. In 1893, he argued that there was on such thing as an individual Jew to the "others." Jews were classified and stereotyped as a group.<sup>16</sup> The context of these remarks were the negative connotations the "others" in society placed upon Jews.

The sermons often briefly mentioned that Jews were persecuted in other parts of the world, particularly Russia. His hopes were raised by the Bolshevik Revolution which brought down

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<sup>16</sup> "As Others See Us," November 12, 1893.

the Czar. Russian Jews celebrated Passover without fear for the first time.<sup>17</sup> However the following week he discussed that there was still Jew-hatred in America. In defense of his nation, he applauded the separation of Church and State.<sup>18</sup>

The last prominent item on his agenda of social justice was charity. He believed strongly in charity and was involved in several benevolent organizations. However, by the mid 1910's he was disillusioned by the waste of charity money. He argued that charities waste money by duplicating staff and administration so that less money was being dispersed to a greater number of people even though more money is being collected. He addressed in particular the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

By the definition of goals that Gries stated in his tenth anniversary sermon, one can conclude that he gave his attention to all four areas. He found a measure of success in most of his objectives but in varying degrees. In his last sermons delivered in April and May of 1917, Gries summarizes his attitudes and his goals; he delivers large doses of praise and criticism.

His last goal, to establish Jewish principles as the moral law of mankind, is a failure. To the modern reader such a goal is hopelessly naive but these were the days before the great world wars. In his farewell address delivered at the outset of World War I, Gries settled for a smaller vision, a world where each individual practiced their religion. "If all truly believed

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<sup>17</sup>Untitled sermon, April 8, 1917.

<sup>18</sup>"The Problems of Jews in America," April 15, 1917.

their religion, there would be no war."<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, he still had faith in human brotherhood.

His third goal, to cause the world to understand Judaism, consumed a great deal of his energy. His services were open to the entire community and his continual message was the universal element of religion, the message of Judaism was that all people could pray together. Despite his preaching, he continually battled Christian prejudice against Judaism. Nonetheless, he concluded in his final sermon with: there is a "spirit of fellowship between Jew and Christian, between believer and unbeliever..."<sup>20</sup>

To put Judaism back into the lives of Jews was his second goal. In one of the final sermons, he berated those who were not loyal to Judaism, who came and mocked the service. He declared with obvious anger that for Jews there is no sabbath in America either on Sunday or Saturday. American Jews were ignorant of their history.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, he was storming at the wrong crowd, his regular congregation. Contrary to his sermon, a great number of Jews were motivated enough to join the temple because the membership grew 500%, far beyond the growth rate of the city. Moses Gries certainly made Judaism important to many Jews.

The success of his first and foremost goal, to lead Jews to Judaism was again reflected by the enormous growth rate of his

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<sup>19</sup> "My Religion, God, and Man," May 20, 1917.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> "the Problems of Jews in America," April 29, 1917.

synagogue. He fought mightily against assimilation and intermarriage; at one point he preached that those who do not participate should leave the Jewish community in order that those who do want to participate are not impeded by the dead weight.

"Judaism is the Eternal who is God."<sup>22</sup> Judaism for Gries was the belief in the One, universal God. This message was the purpose behind his rabbinate. He had successes and failures but even up until the last sermon, he never lost sight of the source of all of his thoughts and actions, the universal God.



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<sup>22</sup> "My Religion, God, and Man," May 20, 1917.